

The Year of Cathedrals

You may already have noticed that 2020 has been declared The Year of Cathedrals: The Year of Pilgrimage. Each cathedral will have its own celebratory programme of services and events, but one of the things that they are all aiming to do is to offer pilgrimage-routes, for individuals or groups, with the cathedral as a focus: walks that can be enjoyed for their spirituality, their heritage and, in many cases, their natural beauty and historic resonance. Although well over 10 million people already visit our cathedrals each year, it is hoped that that many more will discover them – great and small, medieval and modern, famous and not so famous – during the year, and will enjoy collecting stamps for each cathedral visited on the special 2020 Year of Cathedrals ‘passport’.

The word ‘cathedral’, which we have been using in English since the thirteenth century, comes from the Greek καθέδρα (kathédra), meaning ‘seat’, in this case the seat, or cathedra, of the bishop. Not that we borrowed it directly from Greek: Latin borrowed it first, and it then passed into Old French, from where it came into English in the time of the Plantagenets. There had been cathedrals in Anglo-Saxon England, of course, but then the chief church of the diocese, which held the bishop’s cathedra, was called, quite literally, the ‘head-church’, heafod-cyrice.

Christianity started to develop a public presence in the fourth century, following Constantine’s declaration of religious freedom in 313, and from then on the western church adopted details of architecture and ritual practice that were well-established in the secular world. One such detail was a special seat with arms and a curved back, often made of rich materials, which was used in the secular world as the seat from which imperial authority was dispensed by high-ranking officials. It now also became the seat, the cathedra, for the bishop, symbolising his authority within the church. At first bishops delivered their teaching from the cathedra, although this often meant that it had to be moved forward from its original position in the apse behind the altar. However, as congregations and cathedrals became bigger, sermons were delivered standing, initially from a lectern and later from a pulpit, allowing the cathedra itself to remain fixed. In Anglican cathedrals this fixed position is usually on one side of the Choir.

Originally – and this continued to be the case in Anglo-Saxon times – the cathedral was run by the bishop himself together with his ecclesiastical household or familia. But as the bishop’s pastoral and administrative duties grew, and as the worship in cathedrals became more elaborate, the responsibility for administering the cathedral itself was gradually delegated to a separate body of clergy led by the Dean. This meant that a bishop, once consecrated and installed in his cathedra, would only come to the building that housed this cathedra – the cathedral – for official worship on special occasions and the greater liturgical feasts. As a result, the clergy responsible for the life of the cathedral, in all its various spiritual and practical dimensions, came to be, in law, a separate ecclesiastical corporation or Chapter, with its own rights and privileges. There have been many subsequent changes, of course, not least the acceptance of women priests and bishops and the appointment of laypeople to serve alongside the clergy as members of Cathedral Chapters. But the essential features of this distinctive legal structure continue in the Church of England today, even in the many new cathedrals that have been created since the Reformation.